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The Unresolved Questions Letelier Case

*Why were warnings of Chile's plot
Why was U.S. evidence withheld?*

By John Dinges and Saul Landau

COOPERATION with "friendly" intelligence agencies was the established practice of U.S. embassies and the CIA abroad, and that included granting visas to known agents to conduct intelligence missions in the United States. But something about the request Ambassador George W. Landau received in late July 1976 from a Paraguayan government official in Asuncion aroused his suspicions.

The official, a top aide to Paraguayan President Alfredo Stroessner, assured Landau that Chilean President Augusto Pinochet himself was asking for a favor. The official said he needed visas immediately for two Chilean Army officers using Paraguayan passports to travel from Asuncion to Washington on an intelligence mission. The mission, he said, had been cleared with the CIA station in Santiago and the two men would be in touch with CIA Deputy Director Vernon Walters in Washington.

Ambassador Landau, according to his later testimony, issued the visas for the two men the next morning. But his suspicions led him to take two precautions: He had the agents' false Paraguayan passports photographed, and he sent the photographs to CIA headquarters with a full account of the affair — just in case the Chilean agents were lying about why they were going to Washington.

Landau's action was the first brush by a U.S. official with Chile's secret operations leading up to the assassination of Orlando Letelier six weeks later. In the weeks preceding the assassination of the leftist former ambassador and foreign minister, a flurry of cables and official communications went back and forth between the U.S. Embassy in Asuncion, the State Department, the CIA and the Immigration and Naturalization Service concerning the two Chilean agents, whose real identities — not learned until almost two years later — were Michael Townley and Armando Fernandez, the Chilean secret police agents who led the operation to kill Letelier.

CIA Director George Bush and his deputy, Gen.

Walters, were, received and acted on Landau's warning. The ambassador's cable, sent via a top secret State Department "back channel," went first to the office of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

All that raises a series of disturbing questions. U.S. officials at the highest levels knew in advance about Chile's undercover mission in Washington and possessed photos and passport information. Was that information sufficient foreknowledge to have prevented the murders? Once the assassination occurred, was the information turned over immediately to the FBI by the persons and agencies possessing it?

The pictures and the advance information obtained by Landau and others ultimately provided the keys to solving the case. But, unlike fictional spy mysteries, all the pieces of the puzzle did not fall into place with the identification of the guilty. Instead, the U.S. agencies involved in the case imposed an extraordinary mantle of secrecy over the actions of U.S. officials before and after the assassination and over the records and files relating to those actions. Given the secrecy about the extent of U.S. government foreknowledge, the questions we raise can only be partially answered.

According to our reconstruction of events, the Letelier assassination was set in motion in late June 1976. Pinochet's intelligence service had received reports of Letelier's recent visit to Holland to lobby against a \$63 million investment by a Dutch company in Chile and of confidential meetings in New York between Letelier and a prominent leader of Chile's centrist Christian Democratic Party. Congress had just cut off Chile's military aid because of human rights violations.

Over the next three months, Col. Manuel Contreras, chief of DINA, the Chilean secret police, dispatched five of his agents on four separate but interrelated missions to Washington to carry out the order to kill Letelier. Of the four missions that made up the Letelier assassination, three were directed by U.S. authorities.